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Parental Involvement Needed to Win Trust and Understanding

By Thomas L. Wells
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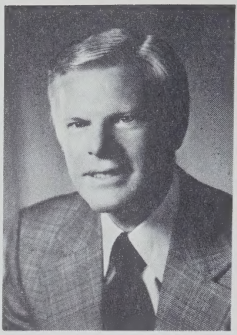

Opening Remarks
to the 52nd Annual Conference
of the Canadian Education Association

in Toronto
on September 24, 1975

by the Honourable
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I would like to comment on one of your many excellent program topics, because I think in one way or another it encompasses most of the others and it is the one that I feel most strongly about. That topic is the one that a distinguished panel will be discussing later this morning, "A Major Development. Involvement of the Public in Education."

I sense, that in Canadian education today there is an intense need for the meaningful involvement of the public. In some cases, the need arises because of an organized demand for the formal sharing of power with community or parental groups. More often though, the need arises for precisely the opposite reason: because there is no organized demand, no community activist group, just a great many ordinary parents and citizens who don't understand what is going on in schools.

Frankly, I don't see major dangers coming from the organized pressures, from the activist lobbies of one sort or another. You may not agree, if you are a trustee or an administrator who has to deal with them. But at least their requests are known. They make sure you don't overlook them. And somehow, with a lot of perspiration and good will and even trauma, we eventually reach an accommodation. The legitimate part of the group's demands are met; the long-term viability of the institution is protected; a new equilibrium is established, and on we go.

A major danger

But I do see a major danger in that second group, the parents and citizens who may not be organized, who may not be circulating petitions or appearing in delegations before the board, but who simply do not know what is happening in the schools.

I say this because it is human nature to be uneasy and suspicious about the things which are not explained and which we do not understand.

The way in which the curriculum is organized has changed. Are the 3 R's still covered? No one has given them a chance to find out. If some children don't seem to be able to read and write and add and subtract as well as their parents used to, then the assumption is that the 3 R's are not covered.

Youngsters are asked to compete with themselves, not with their peers. But parents ask

where do our youngsters really stand? Is their academic ability at the level where they can consider a professional career? It is sometimes pretty hard to find out, especially if it isn't. Let's look at a couple of fairly typical situations.

Typical situations

I'd like to help my youngster more at home, but I don't really understand the methods the teacher is using. Could I come and watch? Well, I suppose you could. But I'd have to let Miss Smith know a week in advance. And the next two weeks are very busy because of the Easter concert. And then comes the holidays, and so on. Chances are the parent never does visit the classroom, and a person who might have become an enthusiastic supporter of the school and its program becomes, instead, one more person who feels that there is something not quite right with the system.

Your child comes home from her ungraded junior division classroom with a report that says, "Mary's progress in language arts is satisfactory for her stage of development." You are apt to assume that everything is all right. You may think that your own parents had a better picture of how you were doing from your report card of 30 years ago which said, in Grade 5, "Spelling 67, English Grammar and Composition 70, English Literature 73," and gave the class average in each. However, you assume, not without a certain uneasiness, that things have changed and that the new system is probably better for the kids.

Two years later, the principal calls you in. Mary's progress has been quite satisfactory for her stage of development, but he thinks more could be done for her by a transfer to a special vocational school than by remaining where she is for another year, and going on to a regular secondary school. At this point you are apt to feel that you have been the victim of double-talk. Overnight you are transformed from a passive supporter to a resentful critic of the system.

I don't want to multiply these examples. There are hundreds of exceptions in all parts of Canada where communication failures like these almost never occur. But unfortunately, there are too many cases where they do. I particularly, am in a position where I hear about too many to be complacent.

Biggest challenge

In fact, I am convinced that the biggest challenge for education today is the involvement of parents in the schools in meaningful ways that will prevent these types of scenarios from taking place. I say this because lack of involvement implies lack of communication. Lack of communication brings lack of knowledge, misunderstanding and mistrust. And the misunderstanding and mistrust gradually erode the base of popular support on which the viability of any public institution depends, particularly our schools.

I said earlier that I am not afraid of the overt challenge to the system from the organized parts of the community. That is a healthy form of interaction to which we can usually adjust without damage. But I am afraid of the gradual erosion of support for the school system that occurs when ordinary people, through lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of methods and objectives, join in with, or at least fail to discount in their own minds, the attacks that, in the nature of things, will always be made on the school system.

Public support imperative

We cannot afford to let this happen because there are many forces buffeting the educational system today which make a broad basis of public support more imperative than ever.

The education system is almost universal. The range of needs and aspirations it must accommodate is enormous. And because it deals with our children, on whom we focus a major part of our love and concern, we cannot expect the public to accept what is done passively and without emotional commitment.

The education system is expensive. Inflation makes us all economically insecure. If we feel this enormously expensive enterprise is out of kilter, we are going to react with more intensity than in times of economic security.

The education system has formidable philosophic challenges. These range from the extreme right which questions the principle of universal education and demands a return to its elitist origins, to the radical left which sees the system as a tool of the consumer-oriented industrial society deliberately manipulated to maintain the social injustice inherent in the status quo. From both ends of the spectrum comes support

for the idea that public funds would be better awarded to the individual to finance his free choice of education on the open market than to a massive, compulsory public institution.

We can deal with these forces, but only if we can maintain a broad basis of public support. We have enjoyed this support and, on balance, we do at present, but the system must change with the times, and to keep that support, we must tell the public what we are about. And we can do that only through involvement.

Make parents welcome

And I don't mean anything highly formal or esoteric about involvement. I simply mean making parents welcome in the school and in the classrooms, as volunteers or just to observe; I mean straight-forward unambiguous communication about student achievement and school policy; I mean taking those extra steps to make sure the community understands the school's program and why it goes about things as it does.

Recently a noted international educator, who has observed closely the Canadian education scene, commented privately that discussions with parents in Canada would leave one with the impression that the general public feel that it could influence virtually any governmental activity in this country more easily than it could influence educational policy. This is a rather damning indictment of us all. It is something that we must correct.

Open classroom doors

You will probably be discussing school curriculum committees of parents and teachers, and board advisory committees of interested citizens, and more active parent-teacher associations. All of these are positive moves in giving parents and the public a greater role in school policy making; and this is good and necessary. But none of them is a substitute for a policy of open classroom doors and open and complete communication with the community.

Nor do I mean a slick system-wide public relations campaign, although this too can be useful in its place. I do agree very much with Professor Robert Stamp of the University of Calgary, whose book, *About Schools*, is just off the press and was serialized recently in the "Weekend" magazine. He writes about this issue

and says,

> "Communication should begin at the classroom level, but not the board level. The classroom is the level of most intensive parental concern"

and a little later,

> "The principle cannot be repeated too often. Community relations increase in importance the closer you move toward the individual classroom."

If Professor Stamp is correct, and I believe he is, then the answer seems to be very easy. Let's open the doors and start talking.

Unfortunately it is not quite that easy. Parents sometimes have to be wooed into the school. You can't talk to them if they are not there, and in some communities parents have become conditioned, one way or another, to expect a minimum of involvement with the school. To overcome that will take time and patience.

Must change attitude

The place to begin, however, is with our own attitudes. Around every profession there grows a certain mystique. If we are not careful, that mystique, that natural professional attitude of not wanting the layman to interfere, can get in the way of open communication.

Let me tell you that, when we were putting together the consolidated Education Act in Ontario, we decided to alter the section which defines who may legally visit the classrooms to include parents. That clause is now generally supported, but I can assure you that at the time I heard a great many misgivings from the profession. None of the educators who spoke to us denied the importance of public support. But they saw the extension of school visiting rights to parents as a potential disruption, something that might interfere in getting on with the job.

Throughout education in Canada we must change that attitude. It starts with us and, through us, to our colleagues in every school in this country. We have some wonderful examples of community oriented schools with open doors and open communications. Some of the people who run them are in this audience. I hope during the conference that you will have a chance to talk to them.

Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, we need to follow their example. We need to maintain

and strengthen the broad general support the public has always given education in Canada. To do that we can't stand professionally aloof; we must explain, over and over, what we are doing and why. And the place for that explanation is in the schools and in each classroom, through parents and teachers who by involvement and dialogue, have come to understand and trust each other.

This must be done because today, in my opinion, the stakes were never higher.

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